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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GOL DOWNBEAT ON LATEST ARAB LEAGUE MEETING

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) The results of the January 27 Arab League foreign ministers meeting in Cairo were disappointing both to the Lebanese majority and the opposition. Acting FM Tarek Mitri and the PM's senior aide Mohamed Chatah, who represented Lebanon in Cairo, had weak support from Lebanon's friends and had to beat back suggestions unfavorable to the Lebanese government. An advisor to opposition leader Nabih Berri criticized the text of the final communique, adding that the Arab initiative needed stronger U.S. support to succeed. Mitri characterized the Arab initiative as "running out of steam." He noted the increasing criticism of presumed consensus candidate Michel Slieman in the pro-Syrian Lebanese press and that there is good reason to believe Syria and its Lebanese allies want no election at all. It is not clear when, or if, Amr Moussa will return to Beirut. End summary.

DEVELOPMENTS THAT DON'T HELP LEBANON

12. (C) In meetings January 29-30 with Charge and Poloff, Acting FM Tarek Mitri and the PM's senior aide Mohamad Chatah, both just back from the January 27 Cairo Arab foreign ministers' meeting, expressed disappointment about the Arab League initiative. Mitri noted that Moussa's report on his talks with the majority and opposition in Lebanon made only oblique reference to Syria obstructing the election of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman. On the positive side, Moussa did highlight Syria's "double-dealing" tactics.

13. (C) Chatah said that Amr Moussa failed in his two principal objectives which were, first, to have clarified the ambiguous language of the earlier Arab League communique on the composition of the cabinet and, second, make clear that the sequence of events should be election of a president first followed by formation of a cabinet.

14. (C) Chatah complained that the atmosphere of the meeting helped the GOL's opponents. Syrian FM Muallem was very aggressive, and the others addressed him as the key player who had to be mollified. He spoke as if he were a member of the Lebanese opposition rather than an outside observer. Qatar, Oman, Algeria and Libya supported Moallem. By contrast, Lebanon's allies Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan were not aggressive. (Chatah did not say so, but we suspect

that Mitri, the head of Lebanon's delegation as acting FM, was not too aggressive either as he is the academically inclined Culture Minister.) There was the impression, Chatah said, that the Arab League was brokering between two Lebanese factions of equal stature rather than treating the legitimate Lebanese government as a member of the Arab League. Oman in particular pushed this view.

15. (C) Another bad development, Chatah and Mitri said, was that Moussa gathered again the "G5": FMs of Syria, Qatar, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, plus Moussa, before the main meeting, and this group presented the larger AL group with its recommendations. There was no Lebanese input to this group, which had also met on January 5. One of the recommendations from this "G5" was that the two Lebanese parties commit to the same government program announced by the Siniora cabinet in 2005. This includes a number of troublesome provisions including protection of Hizballah's right to arms. The Lebanese objected strongly and got the wording changed to say that the 2005 program would be the starting point for discussions of a new government program.

16. (C) Mitri said that he objected when Syrian FM Moallem referred to Lebanon as a country divided into two halves--one supported by Syria and Iran, and the other by Saudi Arabia and the U.S.-Israeli alliance. Mitri felt that Lebanon's position was weakened by the fact that Saudi FM al-Faisal did not come out in his support, but merely observed that Saudi Arabia is neutral and was quiet for much of the meeting after that. Muallem also argued that Mitri was not entitled to speak for all of Lebanon, as he represented only one faction. Mitri responded that he spoke for the internationally recognized Lebanese government.

17. (C) As for rumors that Syria, Qatar, and the French are
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trying to replace Sleiman with someone else (e.g., former minister Fares Bouiez, known to be pro-Syrian), Mitri said he had been assured by all three that this was untrue. However, Arab League Beirut representative Ambassador Abed Rahman al-Solh told Emboffs on January 28, that the Syrians were considering three alternatives to Sleiman: Bouiez, former MP Jean Obeid, and Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh. According to al-Solh, Bouiez is particularly favored by the Syrians, as they have extensive intelligence files on him, a great incentive for Bouiez to toe the Syrian line, should he be elected president. Notwithstanding such rumors, Sleiman remains the sole Arab League-endorsed consensus candidate, even though Mitri suspects that Syrian support for him may only be lip service.

SYRIA UNFAZED BY THREATS TO DAMASCUS SUMMIT

18. (C) Mitri acknowledged that at the first (January 5-6) Arab League foreign ministers meeting it was generally believed that the possibility of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and perhaps others boycotting the March 2008 Damascus-hosted Arab League summit would induce Syria to be more pliable concerning Lebanon's presidential election. All such illusions were gone at the January 27 meeting. Mitri agreed with the Charge that for Syria, its interests in Lebanon seem to be far more important than a good summit turnout, adding that he had recently seen a Syrian MP dismiss the summit as "just another meeting." Furthermore, at the January 27 meeting, the Libyans said it was unfair to use the summit as a stick to threaten Syria, while others commented that Lebanon and the summit issue should be kept separate.

19. (C) Advisor to opposition leader and Parliament Speaker Berri, Ali Hamdan, told Pol/Econ Chief on January 30 that the January 27 meeting and resulting communique complicated, rather than clarified, matters. Hamdan stressed that government formation and the electoral law were included in the same paragraph as the election of the president,

implying that agreement on the whole package was necessary before the election could take place. Hamdan said that although the opposition still supports the Arab League initiative, it had little confidence in its prospects for success unless the U.S. came out with a strong endorsement.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The January 27 Arab League meeting seems to have been a step back for the government of Lebanon and the March 14 coalition. There was nothing that helped March 14's objectives regarding the cabinet formation. A new element for debate that favors Syria's allies such as Hizballah, keeping the 2005 government policy in place, has been introduced. Lebanon's friends in the Arab League were not effective or willing to push back against Syria and its allies. And next steps are not clear. End comment.

GRANT